DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 113 749 CS 202 336

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TITLE Question Asking and the Teaching of Writing.
PUB DATE Oct 75
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the New York State English Council (25th, Buffalo, New York, October 9-11, 1975)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS *Creative Writing; Literary Perspective; *Questioning Techniques; *Student Writing Models; Teaching Methods; *Teaching Techniques; *Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that provocative questions can be used by teachers to help students write. Described are a series of questions drawn from rhetorical theory, such as "How many times can I change focus so as to get the most complete understanding of a topic?" "When does X occur?" "Why does X occur?" and "What does X cause or prompt?" Several exemplary works are examined, including Shakespeare's "Hamlet" and "Beowulf." Several student compositions are also examined and discussed in terms of this questioning technique. (TS)

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Question Asking and the Teaching of Writing

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CS 202 336

Writers are fond of saying that writing is a terribly lonely business. One goes off by himself, confronts a blank page, and, hopefully, returns with something to show for all the toil and agony. We teachers of writing are sympathetic with this point of view--at least where our students are concerned. This lonely endeavor is good for the soul, develops character, sometimes even results in good writing. Moreover, this assumption about the responsibility of the writer puts the burden where it belongs: on our students. Ultimately, they must make the pieces of experience fall into shape, impose a personal order upon feelings, ideas, facts. We teachers of writing simply cannot dictate what that order will be.

This sense of writers' ultimate personal responsibility for their own work leads some teachers to suggest that writing cannot be taught, that each of us must somehow learn it for ourselves. Writing teachers, according to this school of thought, can correct usage, harp on the importance of appropriate diction, and at regular intervals write AWK! in the margin. And teachers can preface writing assignments with interesting reading and stimulating class discussion.

Useful as these procedures may be, they are not enough. Writing teachers can and should make a much greater contribution to students' writing. Without telling students what they are to think or feel, without leading them along in some insidiously Socratic manner to our own conclusions, we can intrude--helpfully--into the early stages of the composing process. We cannot guarantee that they will write elegant, perceptive prose. But we can help students explore facts, feelings, theories, values in ways that will at least increase the likelihood of their having something interesting to say when they begin to write.

One method of achieving this helpful intrusion is to pose provocative questions. How can you accept X's claim that...? What conclusions can you draw about...? Should X have done/said/thought...? What is your reaction to...? Such questions as these can help writers focus their thoughts and they are consistent with an important assumption about motivation: People write (indeed, psychologist Jean

Piaget would claim, engage in any activity) only when they feel some dissonance, some disequilibrium, some question that they need to resolve. But the sort of questions I've mentioned do not suggest how one is to think about the issues they raise. They do not suggest the intellectual processes one must use in order to examine the subject at hand in a systematic yet sensitive manner. Moreover, these questions are often restricted to a single essay topic; they apply specifically to one assignment. Students cannot use and re-use these questions in subsequent writings.

In the remainder of this article, I shall describe a more useful series of questions drawn from rhetorical theory. These questions lead one to engage in basic intellectual (I use the term intellectual to include cognitive and affective) processes that are important in any sort of writing. I shall describe each process briefly and identify questions that can help writers engage in pre-writing, the early stage of composing in which writers try to discover what it is they want to say. Also, I shall mention ways these processes/questions can help us respond to students' writing.

Intellectual Processes and Questions

Focus: In examining anything--a scene, an object, a person--we may focus our attention on the entire thing or on some aspect of it. Consider this excerpt from "A Christmas Memory" in which Truman Capote introduces the reader to his grandmother:

> A woman with shorn white hair is standing at the kitchen window... She is small and sprightly like a bantam hen; but due to a youthful illness, her shoulders are pitifully hunched. Her face is remarkable--not unlike Lincoln's, craggy like that, and tinted by sun and wind; but it is delicate too, finely boned, and her eyes are sherry-colored and timid.

The grammatical subjects of the clauses in this passage suggest a series of camera shots--focusing first on a woman, then zooming in to focus on her shoulders,

her face, her eyes. With each change in the grammatical subject, Capote suggests a change in visual focus. And with each change in visual focus, Capote identifies a new facet of his main topic (a woman) about which he must make an observation. Thus changes in grammatical subject and visual focus lead him to consider his subject more thoroughly, more sensitively.

We may also focus on different aspects of an abstract topic, as in this article about the construction of the Alaska oil pipeline:

> For more than six years since the discovery of oil on Alaska's North Slope, the press has emphasized and Washington political leaders have debated the environmental risks. Alaskans have been largely preoccupied with the economic impact. But sparse attention has been given to one price of the pipeline which can be labeled only with a phrase verging on the macabre: the human toll, a toll measured both in human despair and in injury and death. The casualty figures for pipeline-related workers may well turn out to be higher than for any other major construction project in the nation in modern times.

Initially, the writer focuses on (that is, uses as the subject of his classes) those who have commented on the topic--journalists, politicians, Alaskans. Subsequently, he focuses on a significant failure of these commentators, and then on one main aspect of the controversy (casualty figures) that has been neglected.

The primary question for the intellectual process of focus is:

> How many times can I change focus--i.e., attend to different details or facets of a topic--so as to get the most complete understanding of that topic?

Contrast: Part of understanding whatever we focus on entails knowing what it is not, how it differs from other things. To engage ourselves in this process we might ask:

> In what ways is X different from other things I know?
> In what ways is X different from what I hoped/expected/feared?
> Is there anything incongruous or paradoxical about X? Is it out of keeping, incompatible with something else?
> What are my feelings or thoughts about X? How do they differ from my feelings/thoughts about Y?
> How might my feelings/thoughts about X differ from other people's?

Classification: A corollary of contrast is comparison; we must not only know how things differ, we must see what they have in common.

In what ways is X similar to things I know? What does it resemble or remind me of?
Is X an instance or example of a larger class of things?
How many ways can I complete this sentence: X is as _____ as _____.
How can I label X? How can I group it with other things?

Change: For all practical purposes, we assume that things remain reasonably constant, that they stay pretty much the same from day to day. But within that apparent sameness any number of changes may occur--changes in trivial matters of superficial appearance or momentary feeling and in more basic patterns of thinking, feeling, or functioning. People and things are continually growing, becoming, blooming, waning, dying. Our understanding of them must acknowledge these continuous fluctuations.

How much and in what ways can X change? When does it become something entirely different?
What was X in the past (moments ago, years ago)?
What is it likely to be in the future?
What is it in the process of becoming?
What could it become? What couldn't it become?

Sequence: At the beginning of Hamlet, Shakespeare very carefully times the first appearance of the ghost of Hamlet's father. The play opens with castle guards talking about their general sense of uneasiness. Marcellus and others enter and give that general discomfort a specific referent: they expect the reappearance of a ghost. Horatio scoffs at this, refusing to accept such a foolish superstition. No sooner does Horatio speak than the ghost appears and leaves even Horatio persuaded of its existence. It is important that the ghost appears only after the audience has been carefully prepared to accept it. Horatio has to voice his skepticism just before the ghost is seen. Otherwise his acknowledgement of the ghost's reality lacks any dramatic impact.

What is true for the ghost in Hamlet is true for any phenomenon. Our understanding of and reaction to it depends on our ability to locate that phenomenon in temporal, causal, and hypothetical sequences.

When does X occur? What happens before it? What happens after it?
Why does X occur? What causes, prompts, or motivates it?
What does X cause, motivate, or prompt?
If X were the case, then ....?
What would happen or be true if ....?

Physical Context: When the Beowulf poet introduces us to the monster Grendel, he doesn't describe the monster itself. Rather the poet describes the physical surroundings from which the monster emerges:

> Out from the marsh, from the foot of misty
> Hills and bogs, bearing God's hatred,
> Grendel came...
> He moved quickly through the cloudy night,
> Up from his swampland, sliding silently...

The poet hardly needs to describe Grendel or his dam. He simply tells us about the physical context in which one typically find them: our imaginations can do the rest. Although awareness of physical context is not always this dramatic, it is almost always worth our while to think about the surroundings in which we encounter another person, an object, an idea, an action.

> Where is X typically found? Where is it unlikely to be found? Would putting it in a new setting influence my understanding of it?
>
> What is X's relation to its surroundings? Does it fit in? Is it appropriate for or consistent with the things that surround it?

Implications for Writing

None of the preceeding questions or processes is new. Indeed, some of our students--such as the community college freshman who wrote the following essay--use them effectively in their writing. The freshman is writing about a bumper sticker she had recently seen.

> The bumper sticker read, "Honk if you're horny," and was stuck on the man's bright orange sports car. Looking very straight and conservative, he seemed somewhat embarrassed. Dressed in a brown suit, white shirt, and brown tie, he looked very meak and mild. He seemed as if he did not want to look around at the other drivers or passengers of the cars stopped at the red light. His attention was fixed only on the top of the steering wheel. I imagined the orange car could not have been his own; maybe it was his daughter's or his son's. As we both sat at the red light, with cars surrounding us on both sides, a young kid in the car behind him beeped his horn. The man looked up very quickly, wishing maybe that the light had changed. No, it was still red. Only the color of the man's face had changed--to bright red. I could see in his face he was thinking now of the sticker....

The girl who wrote this passage notes a couple of important contrasts: between the appearance of the driver and the message on his car's bumper; between what the man wanted to do (leave quickly) and what he was forced to do (sit and attract attention). She locates the driver in a physical context; other drivers are looking at him and a young kid follows the bumper sticker's instruction. Moreover, the writer focuses on several important aspects of the scene--the bumper sticker, the man, the man's attention, the color of his face, and other drivers. Finally, she locates him in a sequence of events; he can't leave until the light changes, a period of waiting that must have seemed to him like an eternity.

Other students, writing in response to the same assignment, made almost no use of the intellectual processes I've described. For example:

> The sticker,"Thank God I'm Irish" shows the owner's respect for his nationality and is not ashamed of it. It shows he's easy to get along with.
> The sticker "Smith for Sheriff" shows ....

The rest of the essay continues in this vein--a series of two or three sentence paragraphs, each beginning "The sticker 'X' shows ...." The writer makes almost no use of the intellectual processes the previous writer used so interestingly.

We could speculate about whether the first student was simply a better writer than the second. Perhaps she was. But such speculation seems beside the point. It doesn't help us identify the intellectual processes the second student needs to begin using if he is to write more effectively. Nor does it help us explain to the first student why her essay is so effective or how intellectual processes she has used in this essay may be useful to her in subsequent essays.

It may in fact be that the second student will never write as well as the first. But we have reason to think that we can help him make fuller use of the intellectual processes I've described. There's evidence (Young and Koen, 1973; Odell, 1974) that college students can learn to use these processes in formulating the ideas they will present in an essay. And some teachers are reporting success with this basic strategy: Before asking students to write, teachers give them a

list of the questions I've mentioned, above, and ask students to spend fifteen or twenty minutes making notes in response to these questions. The procedure seems to work best when teachers discourage students' early attempts to draft coherent paragraphs; for the pre-writing period, students should simply be encouraged to make as many notes as they can in response to questions on the list. In fact, it seems to be a good idea to push students a bit. If students are unable to see how, for example, a given item differs from other items, the teacher should encourage them to move on--think of what the item is similar to or choose another item to work with. After the fifteen to twenty minute writing period is over, students look back over their notes, select the most important items, and then write about the topic they've been assigned.

This procedure can work with any sort of topic. But for the sake of clarity, it's advisable to make early assignments very concrete. One way to do this is to choose interesting photographs (old Life magazines are a good source) and have them made into overhead transparencies. Begin by using four large pieces of cardboard to black out segments of the picture so that only a small detail is projected onto the screen. By manipulating the pieces of cardboard (and by inviting students to do so) teachers can quickly show students how shifting visual focus can lead to a more thorough examination of the picture. After the class understands about shifting focus, the teacher might give an instruction such as this:

> Look closely at this new picture I've placed on the overhead projector. Write down at least six different details you might focus on. Choose the two or three most important details and, for each detail, answer the following questions (those I mentioned earlier).

After becoming familiar with these pre-writing procedures, students can use them to examine more abstract topics. For example, students might examine the thoughts of a literary character by asking:

> How do the character's thoughts differ from those of other characters in the same work? From thoughts of characters in other works? From my own thoughts?

Do the characters ideas seem to change? Does he/she seem to think X at one and Y at another?

What do the character's thoughts remind me of? Are they similar to my own? To other characters?

What causes these thoughts? If he/she expresses or acts upon these thoughts, then what will happen?

Where does the character express his/her thoughts? Do the thoughts seem appropriate for the setting the character is in?

As with the exercise suggested above, students' answers to these questions take the form of notes which can serve as the basis for subsequent writing. It may be that the writing will go beyond these notes. As students write, they may well come up with new insights that did not occur to them during the pre-writing period. If so, fine. The pre-writing will still have done its work. It will have helped them call to mind the factual information that can allow (if not guarantee) unexpected, intuited insight.

*

In addition to providing students with an effective pre-writing strategy, the processes and questions I've mentioned can help teachers respond more usefully to pieces of student writing such as the following.

The College Freshman of 1975

The college freshman of 1975 has many doubts and questions. Is college what I want? What courses are best for me? These two questions are common with the college freshman and must be thought of seriously.

Is college what I want? Often the freshman is pushed into further and higher education. It may not be what he really wants. Every graduating high school senior must seriously ask himself this question and make the decision alone. The freshman will be more encouraged to succeed and achieve if he feels he has made the right decision.

After he gets to college he asks himself, "What courses will I benefit from and which ones are required? He often needs guidance from a counselor. If he chooses classes to his liking, he will be happier and try harder to achieve good grades. This has a good effect on the freshman and will encourage him to stay in school.

The college freshman today is no different from a freshman fifty years ago. The fears are the same and the questions in his mind are puzzling. But if he has made the decision of furthering his education alone, then he has a far better chance of achieving his goal.

In some respects, this is not a bad piece of writing. The organization is clear. And there are no errors in punctuation or spelling. But the paper is terribly dull. It gives no sense of the complexity, the drama, the interest of its subject. It reflects no real insight into the topic. We could, of course, tell the student this. We could let her know that she hasn't done her subject justice, that she needs to think more creatively, more profoundly. But such a response is not adequate. The care she has taken with the paper (the neat, readable handwriting, the careful proofreading) suggests that she's done the best she knows how. My guess is that she's a serious if uninspired student. If we want her to think better, we'll have to teach her how.

The process of improving her thinking will have to begin with our analysis of the intellectual processes she is currently using in her writing. We should notice, for example, the superficial, highly debatable classification in her last paragraph, (Are college freshmen today really the same as those of fifty years ago?) or the simplistic hypothetical sequences she sets up (Does she really believe that if classes are to students' liking they will inevitably be happier in college? Surely there are other influences that are equally important in determining students' happiness.) We should also note that the subject of almost every clause is terribly general; she continually focuses on some mythical or composite creature (the college freshman of 1975) who has no individual personal reality for her or for her reader.

As we get a sense of how she's operating intellectually, we begin to see what we want her to learn to do. From her use of focus, it seems that she is not terribly observant; she apparently does not know how to look (literally, look) at real college freshmen and base her conclusions about them on her observation. Consequently, one important objective would be to have her learn to observe more closely by learning to shift focus. We could have her find examples of this

process by watching television programs, noticing how the camera shifts focus, moving back to establish a physical setting, moving closer to capture the body language of a character, moving closer still to capture a small facial reaction. Or we could teach her this process by having her do the sort of work with transparencies that I suggested earlier. As she learns to shift focus from one important detail to another, we could encourage her to incorporate this process into her writing, making these details the subject of each clause and, hence, the topic about which the rest of the clause must assert something.

In suggesting ways we might respond to the student who wrote about the college freshman of 1975, I have been very much aware that our response cannot be limited to a written comment at the end of her paper. Our response may occupy several sessions with the student. And these sessions probably will include most of her classmates, since there's a fair chance many of them are having the same sort of problems she is.

Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to argue that we should adopt two closely related teaching strategies: helping students discover what they want to say about a topic by asking a series of questions that engage them in using certain basic intellectual processes; and responding to students' writing by identifying and improving their use of certain intellectual processes. As we adopt these strategies, we have to confront one fact: there's no guarantee that our efforts will make all students into masters of prose style. But we can console ourselves somewhat. College students can learn to use the processes I've described as they think about a given subject. Moreover, these processes are applicable to all sorts of writing assignments; they can use them repeatedly. And, finally, these questions and processes provide us with a practical way of responding to students--a way that has to be more helpful than circling "errors" and writing AWK! in the margin.

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